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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#) [KU](#) [KUWAIT](#) [IRAN](#) [REALTIONS](#)
SUBJECT: KUWAIT'S AMBASSADOR TO IRAN: APPROACHING THE U.S.
IRAN'S TOP PRIORITY

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: Kuwait's Ambassador to Iran, Majid Al-Thufiri, who claims good access to senior Iranian officials, shared his impression of Iran's views towards the U.S., regional policies, and domestic political and economic situation in a March 28 meeting with the Ambassador. His key points were: finding a way to approach the U.S. is Iran's top priority and this pervades the leadership's thinking on nearly every other issue. Iran views Iraq as an opportunity to approach, not confront the U.S. Iran's desire to see Iraq succeed is an important shared objective that could serve as the basis for dialogue, but the Iranians want assurances on the continued survival of their regime. U.S. pressure on Iran is having an impact and forcing the regime to reconsider its policies. Criticism of the regime, and even Khamenei, is reaching unprecedented levels. Iranians are "very frustrated" with Ahmadinejad's failed economic policies and Iran's increasing isolation in the international community. Public statements by Iranian officials are "completely different" than their private views and are motivated primarily by domestic considerations. Iran is looking for a face-saving way to resolve tensions over its nuclear program and will ultimately back down rather than risk a confrontation that could threaten the regime's survival. End summary.

12. (S/NF) On March 28, the Ambassador met for more than an hour with Majid Al-Thufiri, Kuwait's Ambassador to Iran since September 2001. Al-Thufiri, who speaks English, Arabic, and Farsi, is a experienced diplomat and a sharp, insightful observer of Iranian affairs. He claimed to have "good access" at the senior-most levels of Iranian government, including with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Al-Thufiri said he had gained the Iranians' trust and was often asked by Iranian officials for advice, which he gave openly and bluntly. He admitted, however, that it was "not easy to work with the Iranians" because they "lack a clear-cut vision" and often "hide their real intentions."

"Approaching" U.S. Iran's Top Priority

13. (S/NF) Al-Thufiri claimed that "the top priority of Iran's foreign policy is the question of how to approach the United States." "I have seen this in numerous meetings on every level," he said. Al-Thufiri believed the environment in Iran was more favorable to dialogue now than before, noting that Ahmadinejad had broken "taboos" by writing letters to President Bush and the Iranians had "worked very hard to meet you in Iraq." He claimed Iranians were "shocked" when the U.S. halted attempts to begin a dialogue with Iran last year and noted that Iranian officials had been "so proud of themselves that they were going to meet with the Americans," something that they took as confirmation of their

regional importance. Al-Thufiri believed the Iranians viewed Iraq as an opportunity to approach rather than confront the U.S. and saw their desire to "see Iraq succeed" as a common ground upon which dialogue could be built. He claimed that despite their contradictory and belligerent public statements, the Iranians were carefully studying the P5 1 proposal and asking questions about how they could agree to it, something Al-Thufiri took as "a good indication that they are looking for a way out (on the nuclear issue) that will allow them to save face."

¶4. (S/NF) According to Al-Thufiri, the three "pillars" of Iran's foreign policy are: 1) ensuring regime survival, 2) achieving recognition of its role as a regional power, and 3) maintaining its "distance" from the superpowers, primarily the United States. He said the Iranians were "very pragmatic" and carefully avoided taking actions against the U.S. that could provoke a regime-threatening confrontation. But Iran values its influence in the region and uses this influence to elicit concessions from the international community and recognition of its role as a regional power. Al-Thufiri said Iran's main desire was for assurances that there would be no attempts to overthrow the regime. "Give the Iranians a hint of these assurances and they will be very grateful and act in a different way," he argued.

¶5. (S/NF) Al-Thufiri believed U.S. pressure on Iran was having an impact on its policies. He said the Iranians "took (the deployment of a second aircraft carrier in the Gulf) very seriously and are scared to death." Al-Thufiri believed this sort of pressure was "very useful" and said any actions that restrict their ability to project power in the region "affect them very much." He said the unanimous adoption of UNSCR 1747 sent a clear message to Iran that the

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international community was united against it and signaled that its strategy was not working, something Al-Thufiri hoped would cause Iran to change its policies. He claimed that when UNSCR 1737 was passed, "those close to the leader began exerting more pressure on him not to confront the international community." Al-Thufiri predicted Iran would back down before a full scale embargo was imposed, because Iranian officials understood that while they could survive stronger sanctions, eventually sanctions would have an impact and this could affect people's confidence in the regime. Commenting on Iranians' perceptions of the U.S., Al-Thufiri said he "never saw a people love America like the Iranians. It's unbelievable!"

Iran's Two Contradictory Faces

¶7. (S/NF) Iranian officials' public statements are "180 degrees different" from their private views and "have nothing to do with their actual stance on issues," Al-Thufiri said. He explained that these statements were primarily intended for domestic consumption or were driven by disputes between different factions within the Iranian government. "If you understand their intentions, you will not be shocked (by their public comments)," Al-Thufiri noted. As an example, he claimed that in private Iranian officials were completely opposed to U.S. troops leaving Iraq before the country was stable and secure. Al-Thufiri acknowledged, however, that Ahmadinejad was different and tended to believe more in what he said. Ultimately, though, Ahmadinejad was responsible to Khamenei and made controversial public statements when the Supreme Leader allowed him to do so, Al-Thufiri argued, noting that Ahmadinejad has been more subdued over the last several months because Khamenei reigned him in.

¶8. (S/NF) Despite the sectarian nature of Iran's regime, it acts based on calculations of power, not religion, Al-Thufiri argued. Iranian officials "never talk to me on a sectarian basis, but rather as a state." For example, Al-Thufiri claimed Iran viewed Hizballah solely as a useful bargaining

chip. "Fundamentally, the Iranians are bazaaris," he explained. "Everything has a value," including Hizballah.

Economic and Social Climate in Iran

¶9. (S/NF) Iran's economic problems and increasing isolation from the international community were having a profound affect on internal political dynamics in the country, Al-Thufiri said. In particular, Ahmadinejad's failed policies are generating considerable criticism from all sides. He claimed that Ahmadinejad was "a pain in the neck for everyone, including Khamenei." According to him, some people had even asked Khamenei to remove Ahmadinejad from the presidency, something Al-Thufiri believed the Supreme Leader would not do this "because it would reveal to the international community that Iran is having domestic problems." Al-Thufiri said criticism of Ahmadinejad was beginning to affect Khamenei as well. "Before, people would talk (disparagingly) about the competency of the government, but now they are questioning the (Supreme) Leader's competency," he explained.

¶10. (S/NF) Al-Thufiri said this perception extended to the highest levels of government, citing a private meeting with former president Khatami in which Khatami characterized Ahmadinejad as a "child" and asked "how (could) the Supreme Leader allow him to do this." Al-Thufiri said he was also hearing unprecedented criticism of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei in private gatherings of Iranian business leaders, ex-Ambassadors, parliamentarians, and even retired politicians associated with the Supreme Leader. He claimed the business community was "very frustrated" with both leaders, and said he had never heard this level of criticism before. One friend close to Khamenei told Al-Thufiri that he still believed the Supreme Leader would resolve Iran's problems peacefully, but noted that the Revolutionary Guard and other security forces exerted a negative influence on the country's leadership.

¶11. (S/NF) According to Al-Thufiri, "the impact of religion in Iran is zero or below zero." He claimed Iranians, even outside Tehran, "have nothing to do with religion" and noted the strong public reactions to Ahmadinejad's attempts to enforce stricter religious standards of conduct. There was a pervasive, strong resentment in Iran towards the religious establishment, he reported. As an example, Al-Thufiri related a conversation he had had with the son of an ayatollah. The young man asked Al-Thufiri if he drank and

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then told him, "I drink (alcohol). I never pray, I drink." The young man, indicating his father, continued, "I hate this man. He is the most opportunistic person I ever saw. He uses religion to get whatever he wants." Expressing the extent of his disillusionment, the young man concluded, "I want to die as an infidel, not a Muslim."

Iran's Muddled Iraq Policy

¶12. (S/NF) Al-Thufiri argued that Iran had two contradictory strategies in Iraq: one led by Iran's intelligence apparatus, and the other by the Iranian government. For example, none of the Iranian government officials he talked to could rationalize Iran's support of Moqtada Al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army, and some even admitted that this was a "mistake." Al-Thufiri believed Iran was more coherent and consistent in its support for the political process (which brought Iraq's Shi'a into power) and opposition to any breakup of Iraq into autonomous regions that could embolden Iran's own ethnic/religious minorities. He said Iran was also very careful not to be seen as supporting just one faction in Iraq, because it believed Iraq would eventually re-emerge as a strategic rival and wanted to ensure that it continued to have good access. "And the only way to have good access is

to have good relations with everyone," he argued. Al-Thufiri claimed the Iranians recognized that despite being Shi'a Iraq's leadership was ultimately loyal to Iraq and noted that former PM Ibrahim Al-Jaafari's first visit to Iran was characterized by "major disagreements."

Kuwait/GCC-Iran Relations

¶13. (S/NF) Al-Thufiri said five years ago Kuwait adopted a new strategy of "positive engagement" with Iran aimed at supporting moderates within the regime and encouraging the Iranian leadership to adopt more pragmatic, responsible policies, a strategy that worked well under Khatami but became more difficult after Ahmadinejad was elected president. Kuwait's leadership told the Iranians that developing nuclear weapons would be a "disaster" and could provoke a regional arms race, and encouraged them to be more cooperative and transparent with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The Kuwaitis also warned Iran not to underestimate the U.S.: despite the problems it faced in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, the U.S. still had the capability to inflict significant damage on Iran, and there was little divergence of view in Washington about the threat Iran could pose. Kuwait repeatedly urged Iran to demonstrate that it was a responsible regional power and had the ability to play a positive, stabilizing role in the region, Al-Thufiri reported. "Sometimes they listen and sometimes they act negatively, particularly in Lebanon," he said. He said there was no movement on the bilateral continental shelf dispute and reported that the Amir was unlikely to visit Iran in the near future.

¶14. (S/NF) According to Al-Thufiri, two years ago Kuwait conducted an assessment of how to limit Iran's rising power in the region and concluded that 1) there should be more engagement with Iran and 2) the Saudis should be convinced to act as a stronger strategic balance to Iran. "We worked very hard (to convince) the Saudis, and finally they agreed," Al-Thufiri said, noting that Saudi Arabia was now taking a stronger stance against Iran and, as a result, the Iranians were moderating their policies. He cited as specific examples their clear commitment to not withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and what he saw as their willingness to find a peaceful solution to tensions over the nuclear program. "Iran will not push this to the brink of war, because they know they will lose and the regime will vanish," he argued. "Iran also knows that if they go too far, they could lose the generous (P5 1 incentive package). And they know it is a generous offer." He believed the Saudi policy of ignoring Ahmadinejad and dealing directly with Khamenei was effective in emphasizing the Supreme Leader was ultimately responsible for Iranian policy and signaling disapproval of the president.

¶15. (S/NF) The Iranians tend to view everything through the prism of the Iran/U.S. dynamic, including their relations with other countries in the region, Al-Thufiri said. For a long time the Iranians were convinced that Kuwait was part of a U.S. "siege" on Iran and that Kuwait and other Gulf countries' positions on bilateral issues were dictated by the Americans. Al-Thufiri told the Iranians that this was not the case, but stated bluntly that "we will not jeopardize our relations with the U.S. for your interests." He said Iran

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had at times asked Kuwait to convey messages to the U.S., but the Amir refused because Iran did not have a clear policy. Al-Thufiri claimed that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries had agreed that Iran must not be allowed to become a nuclear power. He said he routinely encouraged GCC counterparts to engage Iran more openly, explaining that "the more open we are, the more relaxed Iran is."

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LeBaron